Ex-Agent Contests CIA Secrecy Oath

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A former CIA agent filed suit yesterday claiming the agency's secrecy oath amounts to prior censorship and violates the constitutional rights of freedom of speech and press.

Ralph W. McGehee, a CIA employe from 1952 to 1977, claimed in the U.S. District Court suit, that the CIA secrecy oath prevents him from writing from unclassified information he gathered while an agent.

The suit said McGehee is nearing completion of a book on Asian communism, but is afraid of submitting it for publication because of possible legal action by the government.

The CIA contends that under the contract signed by its agents at the time of employment any writings by former agents must be reviewed by the agency if they contain information obtained while working for the CIA.

McGehee said the book is based on unclassified material gathered during his years as an agent and on research done since leaving the agency in February 1977.

No other details of the book were given, but the suit indicates some portions of it may be critical of the agency since it will attempt to assess "the CIA's failure to understand" Asian communist movements.

The case is to be heard before U.S. District Court Judge June L. Green.

Earlier this year, a federal court in Alexandria found that another former CIA agent, Frank W Snepp III, had violated the CIA secrecy code. Snepp was ordered to forfeit all profits from his book, "Decent Interval," and clear all future material with the CIA in advance of publication.

Snepp's conviction has been appealed. His book deals with the CIA's activities during the final days before the American evacuation of Vietnam.